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Introduction

This paper goes beyond a reconstruction of the environmental transformations to the Yanchep area that can be attributed to Aboriginal people. It is also concerned with conveying the notion that Yanchep holds a significant value and meaning for some local Aboriginal people. This is achieved by depicting how the Aboriginal people viewed themselves in relation to the landscape that is now Yanchep National Park, and provides an interpretation of how their interaction with this landscape over many thousands of years led to significant transformations to natural elements, such as the vegetation. Yanchep National Park is situated approximately 50 kilometres north from the city of Perth and is one of Western Australia's oldest national parks (Figure 1).

Knowing the significance of Indigenous relationships with the landscape also has implications for the Park's management. The Park is simultaneously valued for many different reasons by various groups of people, which has resulted in Yanchep being a contested landscape. This notion of a contested landscape occurs when different perceptions of a landscape and its past come into collision in discussions of that area's social and environmental future, as discussed in Head (2000). The Aboriginal connection with the Park is an integral part of this landscape's multiple meanings and it is important that these, as well as all of the significant elements that have combined to transform this cultural landscape into what it is today, be incorporated into future Park management. It is a landscape of multiple meanings and the management strategy should be inclusive of these combined elements.

Interpretation of the Indigenous Cultural Landscape

The way Aboriginal people conceptualised nature contributed significantly to how they understood themselves in relation to the landscape. The process of this conceptualisation of nature created a relationship with the land that resulted in the environment being central to their lives and well-being whilst also being fundamental to their spiritual beliefs. To appreciate this relationship it is necessary to understand the fundamentals of the Aboriginal belief system that is essentially guided by the 'Dreaming'. This concept in Aboriginal history describes everything from how the land was given shape as

a result of the creative activities of ancestral beings, to the understandings acquired by Aboriginal people. Their spiritual relationship with the land was reinforced by ceremonial songs and dances.



FIGURE 1 – Yanchep National Park Locality Map

The following statement elaborates on the significance of land: Although there is considerable debate in this area and variation amongst past and present-day Aboriginal peoples, certain themes are common to all traditional Aboriginal belief systems. Aboriginal law was established during the Dreaming when ancestral beings walked the earth, creating the landscape and all living species. The Dreaming brought order and meaning to an already existing world and all entities became subject to common law.

The land is both a topographical record of the journeys of the ancestral beings and a physical manifestation of the truth of the moral system. Life is considered a recurrent series of events set irrevocably in motion by the ancestral beings. The active ingredient is the spiritual essence which animates all things. Humans and other creatures were created or fixed in shape simultaneously from the same matter.

(Bomford and Caughley, 1996, p.14)

The Aboriginal people of south-western Australia are collectively ascribed as Noongar ¹, and they share a common culture, language, history and affiliation with this land. Their ancestors have been playing a role in the transformation of Yanchep National Park's landscape for over 50, 000 years. The territory of the Noongar (Figure 2) extended from the Geraldton district south along the coast to Cape Leeuwin, continuing south-east almost to Esperence and then in line north-west to rejoin the coast at Geraldton. It is an area that spans almost 3 000 000 hectares with 1600 kilometres of coastline (Green, 1984).

Each Noongar group had their own 'kaleep', or preferred camping ground, often of special significance to them, and beyond this there was a more extensive area over which they foraged and hunted. In 1940, Norman Tindale identified a number of tribes, or mobs, though some alternately identify these as linguistic groups, and is shown as Figure 2. It can be interpreted from Tindale's map that the Yanchep area was traditionally occupied by the 'Juet' mob (Green, 1984). These Noongar were well acquainted with many of the physical features of the area and had names for the majority of the caves and surrounding wetlands. Moreover, some of these place names are still in use today. The process of naming a place has the effect of adding meaning to it, which serves to reinforce established cultural meanings of that place.

1. The spelling of Noongar varies (Nyungar, Nyoongar, Nynugah) due to the fact that various interpretations of the word exists. Aboriginals throughout Australia utilised a purely oral form of communication, which when interpreted resulted in various spellings.

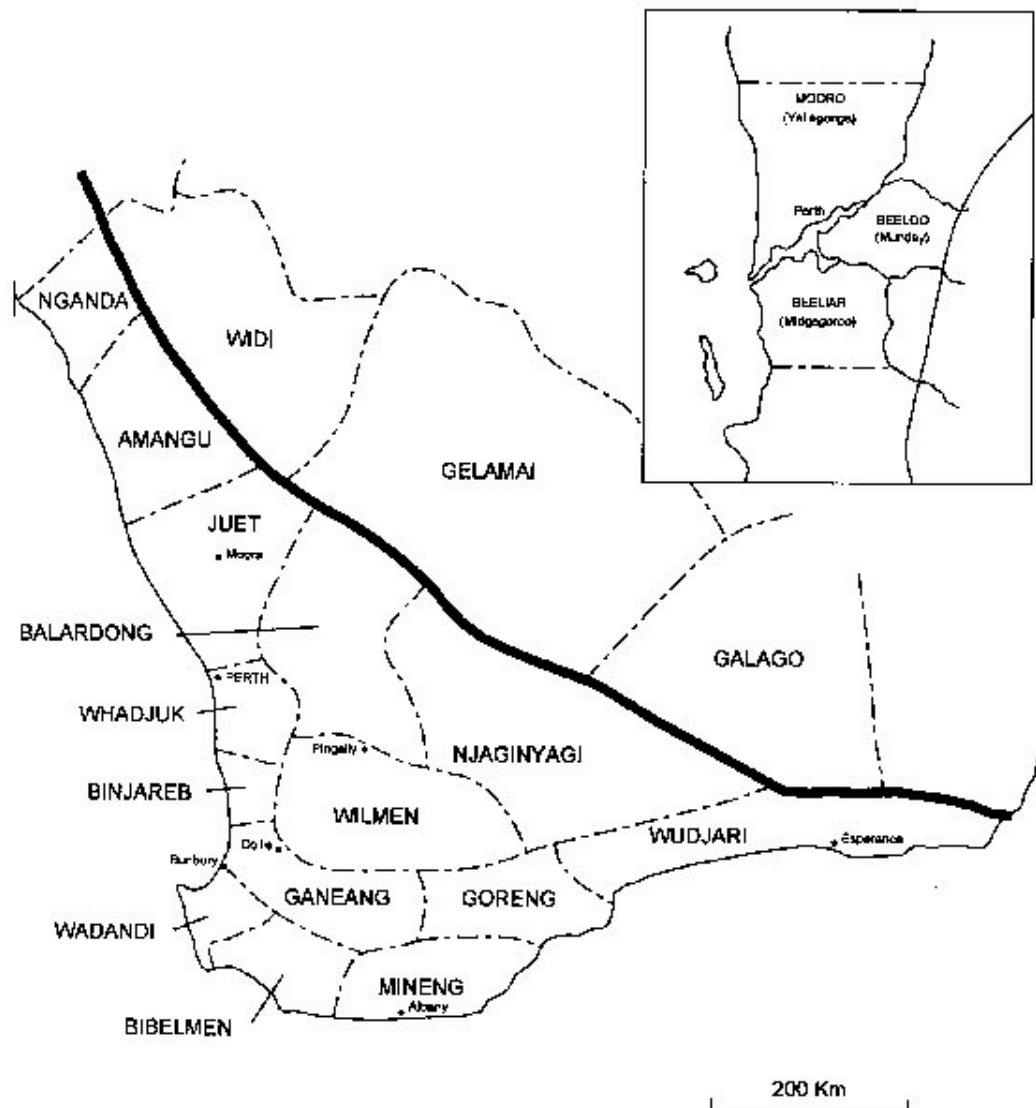


FIGURE 2 – Noongar linguistic groups or mobs (Tindale, 1940)

The name Yanchep comes from the Noongar word 'Yanget', or 'Yandjip', that refers to the Bulrush, *Typha orientalis*, which is abundant around the wetlands of the area. The root of this rush was pounded into a paste and used as a type of flour for baking into small cakes. It is likely the rush provided a kind of staple in the diet of the Noongar of this area. The most important foods the wetlands had to offer came from carbohydrate staples derived from plant storage organs - fruit and seeds, bulbs and corns, underground root tubers, and starch-filled stems or rhizomes (Hallam, 1998).

Early settler George Fletcher Moore explained how the rush was processed and cooked:

Natives are now busy digging the root of a broad sort of flag which grows in a swamp near this.....and a few days later his diary states - Got from the natives a piece of bread made from the root of the flag which they call 'yandyett'. It tastes like a cake of oatmeal. They peel the root, roast and pound it, and bake it. The root is as thick as your finger and a foot long.

(Moore, 1884)

It is evident from other historical accounts from early settlers, such as George Grey, that the country provided adequately for the needs of local Noongars. Though food resources were readily available, the Noongars' ability to survive required a thorough understanding of the environment in order to be able to successfully procure these foods. The environmental knowledge the Noongar had of the Yanchep area was derived from their 'Dreaming' mythology, which influenced all their daily and ceremonial activities. Their environmental knowledge also extended to a weather-based calendar that recognised six seasons. This calendar shown in Figure 3 guided their daily activities and seasonal movements:

Their intimate knowledge of the seasons was reflected in the formation of the resource and weather-based Nyoongar calendar. The calendar contains six seasons and allows for the effective utilisation of the resources of the area at different times of the year. Movement and activities of Aboriginals occurred in response to the seasons, mainly the prevailing wind conditions, temperature and rainfall.

(Bindon and Walley, 1993)

The Yanchep landscape, especially around Loch McNess (Figure 4), provided an abundant source of food during the summer drought period of Birak and Bunuru.

When water supplies of inland localities were diminished by the long summer drought periods each year, the wildlife moved on to the Swan Coastal Plain where permanent fresh water is still available. Early settler Scott Nind noted the seasonal movement of Noongars between inland and coastal habitats:

Those families who have locations on the sea coast quit it during the winter for the interior; and the natives of the interior, in like manner, pay visits to the coast during the fishing season. Excepting at these times, those natives who live together have the exclusive right of fishing and hunting upon the neighbouring grounds, which are, in fact, divided into individual properties; the quantity of land owned by each individual being very considerable. Yet it is not so exclusively his, but others of his family have certain rights over it; so that it may be considered as partly belonging to the tribe. Thus all of them have a right to break down grass trees, kill bandicoots, lizards, and other animals, and dig up roots; but the presence of the owner of the ground is considered necessary when they fire the country for game. As the country does not abound in food, they are seldom stationary, removing, according to the time of year, to those parts which produce the articles of provision that may be in season. During the winter and early spring they are very much scattered; but as summer advances they assemble in greater numbers.
(Nind, cited in Green, 1979, p.25)

This account written in 1831 alludes to the 'individual properties' that Tindale would later identify in 1940 (Figure 2). The resources available throughout these individual properties, especially those produced from wetlands, were never over exploited. It was the responsibility of the Noongar people who occupied each individual part of the landscape to care for this country on a regular basis (Rose, 1992).



FIGURE 3 – Noongar weather-based calendar



FIGURE 4 – Loch McNess

It was their belief that by caring for country and not over exploiting the available resources, the land would in turn sustain them:

At the most intimate, the potential is for a completely reflexive relationship: the person takes care of the country and the country takes care of the person. Such a relationship is built up over time through knowledge and the assumption of responsibility. The relationship so developed is an individual achievement; a person is born with rights, but each must choose further to develop their own relationships.

(Rose, 1992, p.107)

Water was always the most important resource, particularly through the summer drought period. For this reason the Yanchep wetlands have a long established history of Aboriginal usage and occupation. Loch McNess was also mythological site for the Noongar. According to their traditional beliefs the Waugal (Rainbow Serpent) inhabited this Lake and other water bodies. The Waugal was traditionally associated with deep dark caverns and with water, and particularly with places that combine both these elements (Hallam, 1998). Furthermore, Noongar people from Moore River to the north, and from the Swan River in the south, were also known to come to Loch McNess to hold tribal meetings, discuss traditional business matters,

stage corroborees and in some instances initiate young men into adulthood life (W.A. Heritage Trails Network, 1988). It is likely that these gatherings would coincide with a period when resources provided by the wetlands of the area were in plentiful supply, such as in spring and early summer (Djilba, Kambarang, Birak and Bunuru respectively).

The Waugal was also associated with the cave that the natives called Doorda Mia (or the abode of the wild dog). Landor in 1847 described a tale of two spirits, one of which is the Waugal that is associated with the pools and limestone caverns of the Yanchep area:

Beside Chingi, the evil spirit who haunts the woods, there is another in the shape of an immense serpent, called Waugal, that inhabits solitary pools... One day, whilst bivouacking in a lonely and romantic spot, in a valley of rocks, situated some forty miles north of Perth, called Dooda Mya, or Abode of Dogs, I desired a native to lead my horse to a pool, and let him drink. The man, however, declined with terror, refusing to go near the pool, which was inhabited by the Waugal. I therefore had to take my horse myself to the spot, while the native stood aloof, fully expecting that the Waugal would seize him by the nose and pull him under water.

(Landor, cited in Hallam, 1975, p.83)

It is likely that the Noongar of the area did not frequently venture too close to the Lake's perimeter for fear of the Waugal. Gentilli (1998, p.281) wrote: "The Aborigines' association with the Yanchep area was not a completely happy one, despite its abundant water and game, because it was believed to be the home of the Waugaul". Because of this association they are likely to have had a minimal impact on the wetland environment, which helped to sustain the many birds, fish, frogs, crustaceans and tortoises that were utilised by the Noongar. This life strategy had the effect of mimicking an efficient land use management system.

The nearby Pipidinnny Swamp is also significant to the Noongar people. The importance of this wetland is conveyed in the 'Dreaming' story, 'The Emu Cave Dreaming' as narrated by Noongar Elder Ken Colbung:

There is a story about the shark, the whale and the crocodile and the fight they had and the formation of Rottnest and Garden Island.

As the crocodile was walking back he laid down exhausted at what is now known as Yanchep Beach and here he shed that skeletal frame work and then moved on.

The crocodile moved on to Two Rocks where in actual fact the yonga, the kangaroo and the bibilja, the scrub turkey and the head of the animals was waiting and he put a formal request to him to really come in and have a good rest. It was to there, that after consultation with the rest of the animals they made the decision that he could come forward providing he kept to the rules that they had laid down for him. The rules were that he shouldn't be jumping on trees and shouldn't be flying around and he shouldn't get into the water and that he should come forward. He had a special berry tree - the emu berry tree - that was there for him and also he should eat seeds but not meat.

And so he made the decision and they allowed him to come in. First of all he went to Pipidinni Lake and at Pipidinni Lake he sat down and all the blood ran out of his body and you will see that Pipidinni Lake is coloured like blood - brown blood. Then he moved on from there and went to Nowgerup (Now means 'Sweet Water') and here all the marrow in his bones poured out of his body. The crocodile then moved to Emu cave where he laid down and had a good sleep and he remembered all the things that were told to him. Here the crocodile remembered that the bibilja had placed feathers on his body and he saw where the shark had stretched his legs and then he dreamed of this animal he wanted to be. The crocodile then came out a beautiful long legged bird with long neck and a smaller head and beak that was more in line rather than a big head that could eat any animal. He was then one of the animals and due to the fact that he could not use his teeth and jaw any more he was given speed.

Now you will find that the emu is one of the fastest birds alive and can run around to avoid its enemies.

(cited in Kauler, 1998, p.69)

This story gives a meaning to the physical environment that Noongar people encountered and provides an explanation for the coloured appearance of Pipidinny Swamp. It also gives meaning to how the emu came to be in existence and highlights the belief that native fauna had an organisational element. By acknowledging order in their environment, the Noongar reinforced their cultural practice of caring for country by understanding that they too must organise themselves to be in harmony with their environment. Respecting the order of things and the agency of nature ensured the Noongar people were able to sustain themselves throughout thousands of years. This is despite the vagaries and unpredictable climate of the Australian landscape. The story is in essence a practical interpretation of their surrounding environment. It is typical of many Dreaming stories that give similar lines of reasoning by using animals to explain how the physical environment was created. Green elaborated on this notion:

Aboriginal mythology is rich in stories that reveal the interaction and inter-relationship of man, the physical and cosmic environment and their common origins in the Dreaming. The Dreaming linked the Nyungar to the Aboriginal creation and gave them not only an affinity with the land but a personal relationship to it. It was an existence in which Aboriginal man had both place and purpose: a place determined by kinship and a purpose that everyone recognised and acknowledged.

(1984, p.21)

In particular, the use of fire by the Noongar people has been extensively documented by Hallam (1975) in *Fire and Hearth*. Their use of fire was responsible for the majority of the transformations to the landscape that can be attributed to human activity:

"Aboriginal populations did change the vegetational and faunal balance. Fire was a major factor in this pattern of regular exploitation and settlement" (Hallam, 1975, p.15). Fire was a key tool in hunting and foraging, and though it wasn't always used deliberately, it did act to replenish the resources of the land. They knew that by burning certain vegetation types, the landscape became productive. Fire was used to flush out animals and to stimulate new growth of plants for eating, as with the Bulrush Yanget. Early explorer George Grey recorded in 1841 that: "The natives must be admitted to bestow a sort of cultivation upon this root, as they frequently burn the leaves of the plant in dry seasons,

in order to improve it". Fire also acted to clear the undergrowth, which in turn facilitated the movement of Noongar mobs. Furthermore, the new vegetation growth that would occur proceeding a fire would encourage the feeding of animals, such as kangaroos, that could then be hunted. Boucher described some of the local Noongar practices in the Yanchep area:

Fire helped to reduce the ground litter, which made transportation easier and promoted lush growth of the vegetation that attract fauna. For these reasons, 'fire-stick farming' practices were carried out by Aboriginal people which helped to shape the natural environment. For example, Dreaming trails such as the Yabaroo Budjerra Heritage trail would have been frequently burnt every three to four years by the Aboriginal people. This 'fire-stick farming' practice was to clear the undergrowth to make travelling along the trail easier and to also attract fauna that grazed upon the lush regrowth of the vegetation to be hunted by the travellers as a food source.

(2000, p.77)

The evidence of fire use by the Noongar people is however ambiguous and inadequate to sufficiently recount the exact effect it had upon the transformation of the Australian environment. This is because varying theories and questionable evidence exists regarding this particular issue (see Kohen, 1995, Flannery, 1994, Hallam, 1975). The first consideration in this debate is the fact that fire was an important environmental variable even before the arrival of Aboriginals to the Australian continent, and that dating techniques utilised to calculate the pattern and distribution of fire in the past are not conclusive. Head recounted the problem:

An important dimension of the controversy is that the timing of Aboriginal burning as interpreted from the pollen and charcoal record has always been much earlier than the archaeological evidence, even though both have changed over the decades.

(2000, p.19)



FIGURE 5 – Aboriginal display area within Park

Though opinions differ, the long-term transformation of this environment was largely due to either regular Aboriginal burning practices, climate change, or a combination of both. It is debatable as to whether the Noongar significantly impacted upon the landscape through their use of fire, or whether they accelerated a natural or already existing trend (Head, 2000). Furthermore, the impact of fire on biodiversity within the Yanchep area would have been a direct result of the fire regime in the area. The fire regime would consist of the components of intensity, seasonality, interval between fires and the type of fire. What can be established though is that fire was an important part of the Noongar way of life and that they helped to control the frequency and severity of the fire regime. Modern control burning practices by government agencies do not mirror Aboriginal regimes for various practical reasons, such as threats to surrounding landuse.

Conclusion

This paper serves to establish the existence of a strong cultural relationship between the Noongar people and the Yanchep area. It has shown that Aboriginal interaction with the Yanchep area was influenced by the landscape itself. How Aboriginal people perceived their environment influenced the way they interacted with the environment. It also establishes the total context in which the

management of the landscape occurred. Furthermore, it has shown that the mix of their cultural perceptions and the natural agency of the environment combined in such a sustainable manner that resulted in the successful survival of the Noongar people in the Yanchep area.

As for the overall cultural significance of the land to the Noongar people, it is very strong in mythology, involving the elements of serpent, water, earth, cave, and fire. It took thousands of years for these traditions, myths, and cultural understandings to become established and for the Noongar way of life to gain its momentum. It should also be recognised that some contemporary Indigenous people still interact and have a relationship with the landscape today (Figures 5 & 6 show some of the Indigenous activity and display areas within the park).

The value gained from this paper should not solely rest on the historical reconstruction of the transformations to the Yanchep area attributable to Noongar people. An accurate account of the step by step environmental transformations to the Yanchep area throughout antiquity is impossible. The main value of this account lies in the notion that the Yanchep area holds a significant value to Noongar people. It also provides evidence for rethinking in a more detailed way the environmental contexts in which they have operated over long periods of time with the Yanchep area. Furthermore, this reconstruction of the Noongar cultural landscape illustrates processes and mechanisms of environmental change, and the conditions under which they occurred.



FIGURE 6 – Aboriginal activity area within Park

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